

Why Culture Has Come to a Standstill

A Times critic argues that ours is the least innovative century for the arts in 500 years. That doesn't have to be a bad thing.



By Jason Farago

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At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in its fall blockbuster show, “Manet/Degas,” is a painting from 1866 of a woman in the latest fashion. Victorine Meurent, Manet’s favorite model, stands in an empty room, accompanied only by a parrot on a bird stand. Her trademark red hair is tied back with a blue ribbon. Her head is slightly bowed as she smells a nosegay in her right hand: probably a gift from an absent admirer, just like the gentleman’s monocle in her left. She’s wearing a silk peignoir, which Manet has rendered in buttery strokes of pink and white. This is a full-length image, more than six feet tall, but Victorine hasn’t even put on her best clothes. She’s in a dressing gown, and the gown is amorphous. The gown is only paint.

Manet called this painting “Young Lady in 1866,” and the title is the briefest manifesto I know. After ages in which artists aimed for timelessness, Manet pictured a woman living in 1866, in the Paris of 1866, wearing clothes from 1866. The painting was a radical eruption of temporal specificity. An art for this year, in this place, in a form possible only now.



“Young Lady in 1866,” by Edouard Manet. Metropolitan Museum of Art

Most artists and audiences at the time did not think this was such a virtue. “Young Lady in 1866” got bad press at the Salon, the annual exhibition of France’s official art academy, where artists aspired to eternal beauty and eternal values, expressed through classicized motifs and highly finished surfaces. Thomas Couture, Manet’s own teacher, specialized in bloated but very technically proficient tableaux of nymphs and heroes. Only a few Parisians could see, in the thick pallor of Victorine’s face and the impetuous brushiness of her peignoir, the mark of a new cultural dispensation. Baudelaire, Manet’s great friend, articulated it in “The Flowers of Evil”:

O Death, old captain, it's time! Lift anchor!
We're sick of this country, Death! Let us sail ...
To the depths of the Unknown to find something new!

To find something new! That was the imperative of modernism, not only in painting but also in poetry, in theater, in music, in architecture and eventually in the cinema. Your job as an artist was no longer to glorify the king or the church, nor to imitate as faithfully as possible the appearance of the outside world. It was to solder the next link in a cultural chain — fashioning a novel utterance that took novel shape even as it manifested its place in a larger history. “You have to be absolutely modern,” Rimbaud declared; “Make it new,” Ezra Pound instructed. To speak to your time, we once believed, required much more than new “content.” It required a commitment to new modes of narration, new styles of expression, that could bear witness to sea changes in society.

Manet, classically trained, figured out quickly that if he painted scenes of Parisian prostitutes in the same manner as his teacher painted Roman orgiasts, that wouldn’t cut it; he would have to invent a new kind of painting — flatter, franker — if he wanted to capture modern life. From then on, the creators who most decisively marked the history of art, again and again, described their work as a search for a new language, a new style, a new way of being. “I have transformed myself in the zero of form,” Kazimir Malevich wrote in 1915, and in his black square he found “the face of the new art.” Le Corbusier insisted that his open floor plans, enabled by reinforced floating columns, were not just an architectural aesthetic but an age: “Nothing is left to us of the architecture of past epochs, just as we can no longer derive any benefit from the literary and historical teaching given in schools.” Aimé Césaire, who would revolutionize French poetry in the 20th century as Baudelaire did in the 19th, understood that a modern Black expression required “a new language, capable of expressing an African heritage.” “In other words,” he said, “French was for me an instrument that I wanted to twist into a new way of speaking.”

For 160 years, we spoke about culture as something active, something with velocity, something in continuous forward motion. What happens to a culture when it loses that velocity, or even slows to a halt? Walking through the other galleries of the Met after my third visit to “Manet/Degas,” I started doing that thing all the Salon visitors used to do in Paris in 1866: ignoring the paintings and scoping out the other spectators’ clothes. I saw visitors in the skinny jeans that defined the 2000s and in the roomy, high-waisted jeans that were popular in the 1990s; neither style looked particularly au courant or dated. Manet was a fashion maven, and I’d been marveling anew at the gauzy white-striped gown with flared sleeves that Berthe Morisot wears in “The Balcony” to signal that she is a contemporary woman — that she is alive *right now*. What piece of clothing or accessory could you give a model to mark her as “Young Lady in 2023”? A titanium-cased iPhone is all that comes to mind, and even that hasn’t changed its appearance much in a decade.

To audiences in the 20th century, novelty seemed to be a cultural birthright. Susan Sontag could write in 1965, with breezy confidence, that new styles of art, cinema, music and dance “succeed one another so rapidly as to seem to give their audiences no breathing space to prepare.” Today culture remains capable of endless production, but it’s far less capable of change. Intellectual property has swallowed the cinema; the Hollywood studios that once proposed a slate of big, medium and small pictures have hedged their bets, and even independent directors have stuck with narrative and visual techniques born in the 1960s. Have you tried to furnish an apartment lately? Whether you are at Restoration Hardware or on Alibaba, what you are probably buying are replicas of European antiques: “contemporary” designs first seen in Milan in the 1970s or Weimar in the 1920s. Harry Styles is rocking in the ’80s; Silk Sonic is jamming in the ’70s; somehow “Frasier” has been revived and they barely had to update the wardrobes.

If the present state of culture feels directionless — it does to me, and sussing out its direction is literally my job — that is principally because we are still inculcated, so unconsciously we never even bother to spell it out, in what the modernists believed: that good art is good because it is innovative, and that an ambitious writer, composer, director or choreographer should not make things too much like what others have made before. But our culture has not been able to deliver step changes for quite some time. When you walk through your local museum’s modern wing, starting with Impressionism and following a succession of avant-gardes through the development of Cubism, Dada, Pop, minimalism, in the 1990s you arrive in a forest called “the contemporary,” and after more than 30 years no path forward has been revealed. On your drive home, you can turn on the decade-by-decade stations of Sirius XM: the ’50s, ’60s, ’70s, ’80s and ’90s will each sound distinct, but all the millennial nostalgia of the 2000s station cannot disguise that “We Belong Together” and “Irreplaceable” do not yet sound retro. When I was younger, I looked at cultural works as if they were posts on a timeline, moving forward from Manet year by year. Now I find myself adrift in an eddy of cultural signs, where everything just floats, and I can only tell time on my phone.



Illustration by Tim Enthoven

We are now almost a quarter of the way through what looks likely to go down in history as the least innovative, least transformative, least pioneering century for culture since the invention of the printing press. There is new content, of course, so much content, and there are new themes; there are new methods of production and distribution, more diverse creators and more global audiences; there is more singing in hip-hop and more sampling on pop tracks; there are TV detectives with smartphones and lovers facing rising seas. Twenty-three years in, though, shockingly few works of art in any medium — some albums, a handful of novels and artworks and barely any plays or poems — have been created that are unassimilable to the cultural and critical standards that audiences accepted in 1999. To pay attention to culture in 2023 is to be belted into some glacially slow Ferris wheel, cycling through remakes and pastiches with nowhere to go but around. The suspicion gnaws at me (does it gnaw at you?) that we live in a time and place whose culture seems likely to be forgotten.

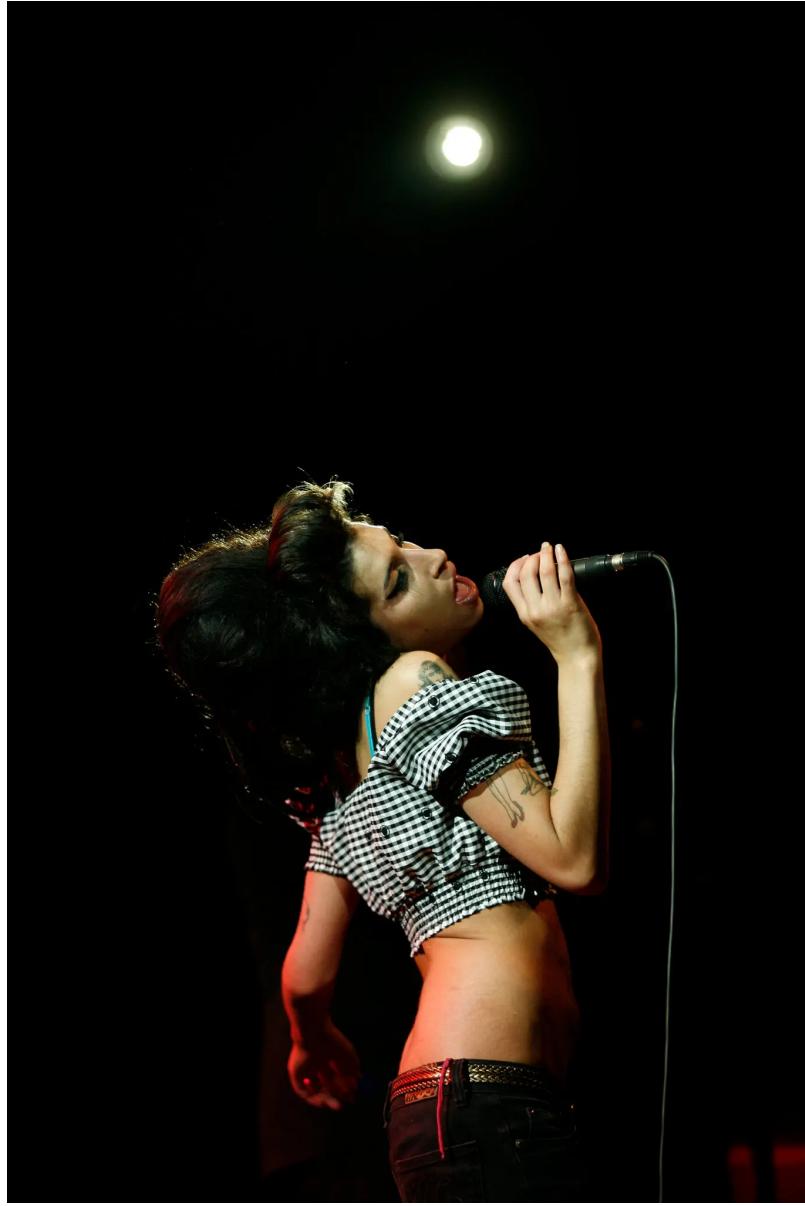
To any claim that cultural progress is “over,” there is an easy and not inaccurate retort: Well, what about X? And sure enough, our time has indeed brought forth wonderful, meaningful cultural endeavors. I find the sculptures of Nairy Baghramian, the videos of Stan Douglas and the environments of Pierre Huyghe to be artistic achievements of the highest caliber; I think Ali Smith is writing novels of tremendous immediacy; I believe “Transit” and “Drive My Car” reaffirm the vitality of cinema; I love South African amapiano and Korean soap operas and Ukrainian electronic music. My own cultural life is very rich, and this is not some rant that once everyone was so creative and now they’re all poseurs. I am asking a different and peskier question: why cultural production no longer progresses in time as it once did.

I have a few theories, but one to start with is that the modernist cultural explosion might very well have been like the growth of the economy more generally: not the perpetual forward march we were promised in the 20th century, but a one-time-only rocket blast followed by a long, slow, disappointing glide. As the economist Robert Gordon has shown, the transformative growth of the period between 1870 and 1970 — the “special century,” he calls it — was an anomalous superevent fueled by unique and unrepeatable innovations (electricity, sanitation, the combustion engine) whose successors (above all information technology) have not had the same economic impact. In the United States, the 2010s had the slowest productivity growth of any decade in recorded history; if you believe you are living in the future, I am guessing you have not recently been on United Airlines. In this macroeconomic reading, a culture that no longer delivers expected stylistic innovations might just be part and parcel of a more generally underachieving century, and not to be tutted at in isolation.

But more than the economics, the key factor can only be what happened to us at the start of this century: first, the plunge through our screens into an infinity of information; soon after, our submission to algorithmic recommendation engines and the surveillance that powers them. The digital tools we embraced were heralded as catalysts of cultural progress, but they produced such chronological confusion that progress itself made no sense. “It’s still one Earth,” the novelist Stacey D’Erasmo wrote in 2014, “but it is now

subtended by a layer of highly elastic non-time, wild time, that is akin to a global collective unconscious wherein past, present and future occupy one unmediated plane." In this dark wood, today and yesterday become hard to distinguish. The years are only time stamps. Objects lose their dimensions. Everything is recorded, nothing is remembered; culture is a thing to nibble at, to graze on.

If there is one cultural work that epitomizes this shift, where you can see our new epoch coming into view, I want to say it's "Back to Black," by Amy Winehouse. The album dates to October 2006 — seven months after Twitter was founded, three months before the iPhone debuted — and it seems, listening again now, to be closing the door on the cultural system that Manet and Baudelaire established a century and a half previously. As the millennium dawned, there had been various efforts to write the symphony of the future (the last of which was probably Missy Elliott's "Da Real World," a "Matrix"-inspired album from 1999 that promised to sound like "not the year 2G but the year 3G"). There had also been various retroprojections, trying to inaugurate a new century with pre-Woodstock throwbacks (waxed mustaches, speakeasies; perhaps you recall an embarrassing circa-2000 vogue for swing dancing).



Amy Winehouse at the Highline Ballroom in New York in 2007. Michael Nagle for The New York Times

"Back to Black" was the first major cultural work of the 21st century that was neither new nor retro — but rather contented itself to float in time, to sound as if it came from no particular era. Winehouse wore her hair in a beehive, her band wore fedoras, but she was not performing a tribute act of any kind. Her production drew from the Great American Songbook, '60s girl groups, also reggae and ska, but it never felt anachronistic or like a "postmodern" pastiche. Listen again to the title track and its percussive piano line: a stationary, metronomic cycle of D minor, G minor, B-flat major, and A7. The bass line of the piano overlays the chords with a syncopated swing, while a tambourine slaps and jangles with joyless regularity. We are back to Phil Spector's Wall of Sound, we are waiting for the Shangri-Las or the Ronettes to come in, but instead Winehouse delivers a much more ragged and minor-keyed performance, with a vulgarity in the song's second line that Martha Reeves would never pronounce. There is a discrepancy between vocals and instrumentation that is never resolved, and the artistry is all in that irresolution.

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Who cares if it's novel as long as it's beautiful, or meaningful?

What Winehouse prefigured was a culture of an eternal present: a digitally informed sense of placelessness and atemporality that has left so many of us disoriented from our earlier cultural signposts. Each song on “Back to Black” seemed to be “borrowing from all the last century’s music history at once,” as the media scholar Moira Weigel once observed, though there was something contemporary about that timelessness too. Extracted from the past into lightweight MP3s, all the girl-group and jazz prefigurations began to seem just as immediate as Winehouse’s North London present.

As early as 2006, well before the reverse chronology of blogs and the early Facebook gave way to the algorithmic soup of Instagram, Spotify and TikTok, Winehouse sensed that the real digital revolution in culture would not be in production, in the machines that artists used to make music or movies or books. It would be in *reception*: on the screens where they (where we) encountered culture, on which past and present are equidistant from each other. One upshot of this digital equation of past and present has been a greater disposability of culture: an infinite scroll and nothing to read, an infinite Netflix library with nothing to watch. Though pop music still throws up new stars now and then (I do really like Ice Spice), the market for new music fell behind older music in the middle of the last decade, and even the records that sell, or stream, cannot be said to have wide cultural impact. (The most popular single of 2022 in the United States was “Heat Waves,” a TikTok tune by a British alternative-pop group with little public profile called Glass Animals; and what’s weirdest is that it was recorded in 2020.)

Outside of time there can be no progress, only the perpetual trying-on of styles and forms. Here years become vibes — or “eras,” as Taylor Swift likes to call them. And if culture is just a series of trends, then it is pointless to worry about their contemporaneity. There was a charming freakout last year when Kate Bush’s 1985 single “Running Up That Hill” went to the top of the charts after its deployment on yet another nostalgic television show, and veterans of the big-hair decade were horrified to see it appear on some 2022 playlists alongside Dua Lipa and the like. If you think the song belongs to 1985 in the way “Young Lady in 1866” belonged to 1866, the joke is now officially on you.

Down at the baseline where cultural innovation used to happen, in the forms that artists once put together to show us something new — in the sounds of the recording studio, the shapes on the canvas, the movements of the dancers, the arrangements of the verse — something has stopped, or at least slowed to such a lethargic pace as to feel stopped. Such a claim may sound familiar if you were around for the postmodernism debates of the 1980s. The philosopher Arthur Danto averred that art ended with Andy Warhol’s Brillo Boxes, while the literary critic Fredric Jameson declared in 1984 that the whole of modernity was “spent and exhausted,” that there was no more style, indeed no more self, and that “the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles.” As for the influence of digital media, as early as 1989 the cultural theorist Paul Virilio identified a “polar inertia” — a static pileup of images and words with no particular place to go — as the inevitable endpoint for culture on a “weightless planet” constituted of ones and zeros.

And yet looking back now, the “postmodern” turn of the later 20th century looks much more like a continuation of the modernist commitment to novelty than a repudiation of it. John Cage’s noteless composition “4’33” was no last music, but flowered into the impostures of Fluxus and the ambient experiments of Brian Eno. The buildings of Frank Gehry and Zaha Hadid did look like nothing that came before, thanks in part to new rendering and fabrication technologies (CAD software, laser cutting machines). The digitally produced music of Massive Attack and even, I hate to say it, Moby did sound different from what was on the radio 10 years before. No one style could be called the true vanguard anymore, sure — but that did not preclude the perpetual discovery of new ones. The forecast at the end of the 20th century was a plurality of new images and sounds and words, powered perhaps by new, heavy desktop production machines.

Since the start of the 21st century, despite all recent digital accelerations of discovery and transmission, no stylistic innovations of equivalent scale have taken place. The closest thing we can point to has been in rap, where the staccato nihilism of drill, deeply conversant with YouTube and SoundCloud, would sound legitimately foreign to a listener from 2000. (When the teenage Chief Keef was rapping in his grandmother’s Chicago apartment, he was following in the tradition of Joyce and Woolf and Pound.) In fact, the sampling techniques pioneered in hip-hop and, later, electronic dance music — once done with piles of records, now with folders of WAV files — have trickled down into photography, painting, literature and lower forms like memes, all of which now present a hyperreferentialism that sets them slightly apart from the last century’s efforts. In the 2010s, hip-hop alone seemed to be taking the challenge of digital progress seriously, though it, too, has calcified since; having switched from linear writing and recording of verses to improvising hundreds of one-verse digital takes, rappers now seem to be converging on a single, ProTools-produced flow.

There have also been a few movies of limited influence (and very limited box-office success) that have introduced new cinematographic techniques: Ang Lee's "Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk" (2016) was the first film shot at an eerily lifelike 120 frames per second, while at the other extreme, Steven Soderbergh shot all of "Unsane" (2018) with an iPhone 7 Plus. Michael Bay's "Ambulance" (2022) included first-person-view drone shots, flying the viewer through the windows of exploding cars the way your dad shot your last beach-vacation memory reel. But by and large the technologies that have changed filmmaking since 2000 have stayed in the postproduction studio: computer-graphics engines, digital tools for color grading and sound editing. They have had vanishingly little influence on the grammar of the moving image, in the way that lightweight cameras did for the Nouvelle Vague or digital kits did for American indie cinema. Really, the kind of image that distinguishes this century is less the spectacular Hollywood image than what the German artist Hito Steyerl has called the "poor image" — low-res compressed pictures like memes, thumbnails, screenshots — whose meaning arises from being circulated and modified.

It may just be that the lexical possibilities of many traditional media are exhausted, and there's no shame in that. Maybe Griffith and Eisenstein and Godard and Akerman did it all already, and it's foolish to expect a new kind of cinema. Certainly that exhaustion came long ago to abstract painting, where every possible move can only be understood as a quotation or reboot. (Kerstin Brätsch, one of the smartest abstract painters working today, has acknowledged that any mark she makes is "not empty anymore but loaded with historical reference.") Consider last year's hit "Creepin'" by The Weeknd: a 2022 rejigger of the 2004 Mario Winans song "I Don't Wanna Know" with no meaningful change in instrumentation in the nearly two intervening decades. It was hardly the only recent chart-topper to employ a clangingly obvious sample, but it's not like the endeavors of the 1990s, when Puffy and family were rapping over "Every Breath You Take." Back then the critic Greg Tate could still celebrate such sampling as a motor of cultural progress; by "collapsing all eras of Black music onto a chip," a new generation had new tools to write a new chapter of sound. Twenty-five years later, the citation and rearrangement have become so automatic as to seem automated — as our recent fears about artificial intelligence and large language models suggest we already know.

Trapped on a modernist game board where there are no more moves to make, a growing number of young artists essentially pivoted to political activism — plant a tree and call it a sculpture — while others leaned hard into absurdity to try to express the sense of digital disorientation. You saw this Dadaist strategy in the hyperpop of 100 gecs, in the crashed-and-burned "post-internet" art of the collective Dis, and above all in the satirical fashion of Virgil Abloh. (Abloh, who died in 2021, was outspoken about how comedy functioned as a coping mechanism for a generation lost in a digital fog: "It's not a coincidence that things have gravitated toward this invented language of humor," he said in 2018. "But then I often wonder: Is streetwear hollow?")

It wouldn't be so bad if we could just own our static position; who cares if it's novel as long as it's beautiful, or meaningful? But that pesky modernist conviction remains in us: A work of art demonstrates its value through its freshness. So we have shifted our expectations from new forms to new subject matter — new stories, told in the same old languages as before. In the 20th century we were taught that cleaving "style" from "content" was a fallacy, but in the 21st century content (that word!) has had its ultimate vengeance, as the sole component of culture that our machines can fully understand, transmit and monetize. What cannot be categorized cannot be streamed; to pass through the pipes art must become information. So, sure, there are new songs about texting and ghosting; sure, there are superhero movies about trauma and comedies about climate change. But in privileging the parts of culture that can be summarized and shared — the narratives, the characters, the lyrics, the lessons — digital media have bulldozed an autonomous sphere of culture into a moral terrain that Aristotle would find familiar: We again want our "content" to authentically reflect the world (*mimesis*) and produce healthy feelings in its consumers (*catharsis*).

Very unfortunately, this evangelical turn in the arts in the 21st century has been conflated with the long-overdue admission of women, people of color and out sexual minorities into the culture industry — conflated, not least, by its P.R. departments. A gay rom-com is trotted out as "the first"; a Black Little Mermaid is a "breakthrough"; our museums, studios and publishing houses can bring nothing new to market except the very people they once systematically excluded. If resisting such market essentialism was once a primordial task of the artist — "I am not burying myself in a narrow particularism," Césaire made clear in 1956 as he forged a French poetry that could span the Black Atlantic — today identities keep being diminished, brutally, into a series of searchable tags.

This institutional hunger for novelty combined with digital requirements for communicability may help explain why so much recently celebrated American culture has taken such conservative, traditionalist forms: oil portraiture, Iowa-vintage coming-of-age novels, biopics, operettas barely distinguishable from musical theater. "It scandalizes progressive sensibility to think that things were so much more complex in this domain a generation ago than they are now, but there you have it," said Darby English, the art historian and author of "How To See a Work of Art in Total Darkness," when asked in 2021 about the recent efflorescence of Black American art in museums and the market. "Because the core project is communication," English said, "anything that resists the art-communications apparatus fails to leave a mark. Form has become increasingly irrelevant during these 20 years."



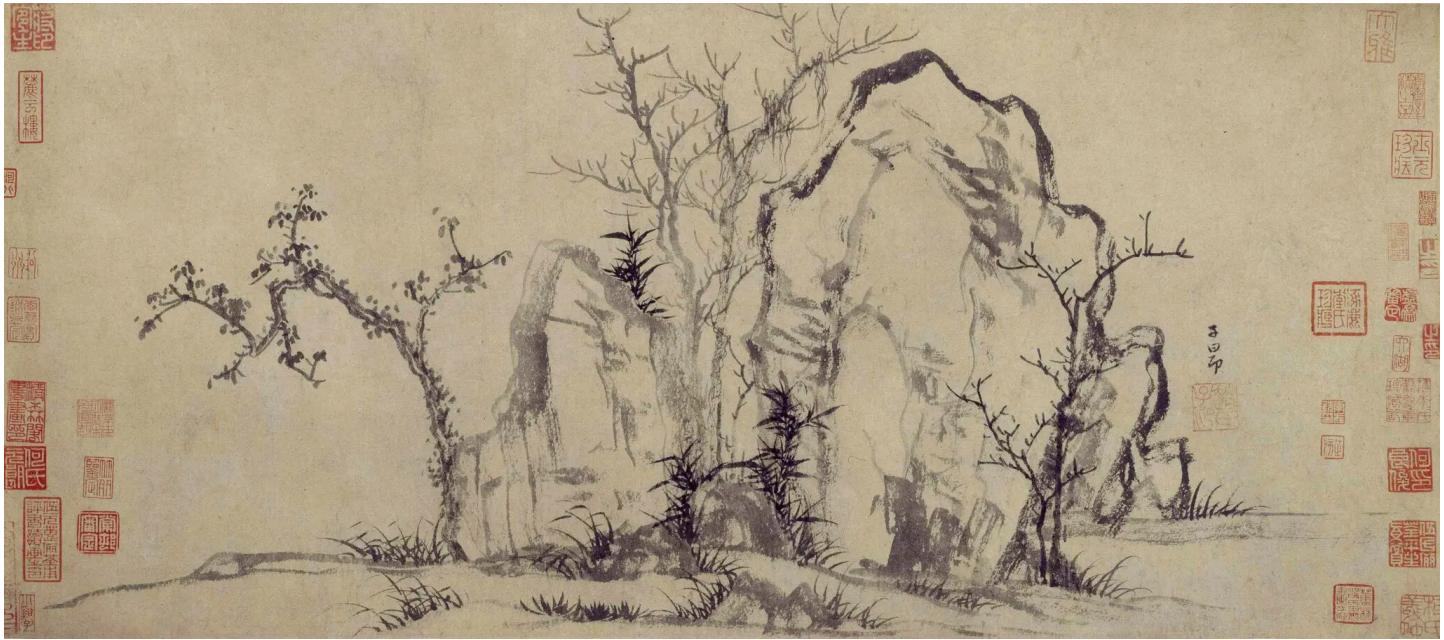
Illustration by Tim Enthoven

There is no inherent reason — no reason; this point needs to be clear — that a recession of novelty has to mean a recession of cultural worth. On the contrary, *non-novel* excellence has been the state of things for a vast majority of art history. Roman art and literature provides a centuries-long tradition of emulation, appropriating and adapting Greek, Etruscan and on occasion Asian examples into a culture in which the idea of copying was alien. Medieval icons were never understood to be “of their time,” but looked back to the time of the Incarnation, forward to eternity or out of time entirely into a realm beyond human life. Even beyond the halfway point of the last millennium, European artists regularly emended, updated or substituted pre-existing artworks at will, integrating present and past into a more spiritually efficacious whole.

Consider also the long and bountiful history of Chinese painting, in which, from the 13th century to the early 20th, scholar-artists frequently demonstrated their erudition by painting in explicit homage to masters from the past. For these literati painters, what mattered more than technical skill or aesthetic progression was an artist’s spontaneous creativity as channeled through previous masterpieces. There’s a painting I love in the Palace Museum in Beijing by Zhao Mengfu, a prince and scholar working during the Yuan dynasty, that dates to around 1310 but incorporates styles from several other periods. Spartan trees, whose branches hook like crab claws, derive from Song examples a few centuries earlier. A clump of bamboo in the corner coheres through strict, tight brushwork pioneered by the Han dynasty a thousand years before. Alongside the trees and rocks the artist added an inscription:

The rocks are like flying-white, the trees are like seal script,
The writing of bamboo draws upon the bafen method.
Only when one masters this secret
Will he understand that calligraphy and painting have always been one.

In other words: Use one style of brushwork for one element, another for another, just as a calligrapher uses different styles for different purposes. But beyond the simple equation of writing and painting, Zhao was doing something much more important: He was sublimating styles, some from the recent past and some of great antiquity, into a series of recombinatory elements that an artist of his time could deploy in concert. The literati painters learned from the old masters (important during the Yuan dynasty, to safeguard the place of Han culture under Mongol rule), but theirs was no simple classicism. It was a practice of aesthetic self-fulfillment that channeled itself through pre-existing gestures. Without ever worrying about novelty, you could still speak directly to your time. You could express your tenderest feelings, or face up to the upheavals of your age, in the overlapping styles of artists long dead.



"Elegant Rocks and Sparse Trees," by Zhao Mengfu, circa 1310. Palace Museum, Beijing

Someone foresaw, profoundly, that this century was going to require something similar: that when forward motion became impossible, ambitious culture was going to have to take another shape. Winehouse, as producers and collaborators have reminded us since her death, was an inveterate collector and compiler of musical clips. (The drummer and music historian Ahmir Thompson, better known as Questlove, remembered: "She would always be on her computer sending me MP3s: 'Listen to this, listen to this. . . .'") She was living through, and channeling into "Back to Black," the initial dissolution of history into streams of digital information, disembodied, disintermediated, each no further from the present than a Google prompt. She freely recombined those fragments but never indulged in nostalgia; she was disappointed by the present but knew there was no going back. And at enormous personal cost, she created something enduring out of it, showing how much harder it would be to leave a real mark amid fathomless data — to transcend mere recombination, sampling, pastiche.

If the arts are to matter in the 21st century, we must still believe that they can collectively manifest our lives and feelings: that they can constitute a *Geistgeschichte*, or "history of spirit," as the German idealists used to say. This was entirely possible before modernism, and it is possible after. The most ambitious abstract painters working today, like Albert Oehlen and Charline von Heyl, are doing something akin to Winehouse's free articulation: drawing from diverse and even contradictory styles in the hunt for forms that can still have effects. Olga Tokarczuk structured her 2007 book, "Flights," as a constellation of barely connected characters and styles, more fugitive than the last century's novels in fragments; to read her is less like looking at a mosaic than toggling among tabs. Bad Bunny, working at the crossroads of trap, reggaeton, bachata and rock, is crafting pick-and-mix aggregations of small pieces, like "Back to Black," that are digital in every way that matters. All of them are speaking out of parts of the past in a language that is their own.

We have every ability to live in a culture of beauty, insight, surprise, if we could just accept that we are no longer modern, and have not been for a while; that somewhere in the push and pull of digital homogeneity and political stasis we entered a new phase of history. We have been evading our predicament with coping mechanisms and marketing scams, which have left all of us disappointedly asking, What's new? Surely it would be healthier — and who knows what might flower — if we accepted and even embraced the end of stylistic progress, and at last took seriously the digital present we are disavowing. And the perpetuity of "Back to Black," still playing in the background of avocado-toast dispensaries in East London and West Hollywood after 17 years, suggests to me that we have not lost our ability to identify voices of our time, even if they are fated to speak a language yoked to the past. Culture is stuck? Progress is dead? *I died a hundred times*, a poet once said, and kept singing.

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